

C-O-L-D by dontburnthewitch

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C-O-L-D

Will Byers had a craving.

He couldn't contend with what it was, but it felt like it did before. Like the grip of the Upside Down, it slithered into his bones, infecting him with an insatiable chill. In a way, it froze his very soul in ways the Shadow Monster never could. Only this time, he hungered for warmth—even if he had no idea what that warmth really was.

He piled on the old knits and afghans, surrounding himself with pillows and burrowing into the living room couch, but it didn't help. It was all so lifeless, suffocating and dull. He spent the whole week swaddled in bulky sweaters and thick socks. Perspiration pooled against his skin day after day and yet none of it sapped the everlasting permafrost caked into his veins.

It was nearly May.

Will's trembling hands cupped a steaming mug of coffee on Friday morning. He hated the smell and it tasted even worse. Still, it was the only thing that gave him any semblance of relief from his internal shiver.

"Honey, are you sure you don't want any cream or sugar?" his mom asked, bustling around the kitchen table to collect her things for work.

Will shook his head. With each sip, the bitterness was growing on him and he had no reason to stop drinking now.

"Hey, hey, watch it. You'll burn your tongue."

He closed his eyes, ignoring his mother's words of caution, chugging the rest of the beverage, his esophagus igniting with adrenaline-pumping heat. Yeah, it burned. It burned like Hell. But that was good. It was good.

Then, a knock at the front door.

With a clink, Will set the cup back on the table and stood up. He

kissed his mom goodbye, shoved his feet into his shoes, and slipped out into the morning air.

"Uh, it's like seventy-five out," Mike Wheeler said, righting himself from leaning against the doorframe and dusting the splinters from his polo shirt. He shook his black fringe from his eyes, knitting his brows in concern as he scanned Will's outfit. "Don't you think you're a little overdressed?"

"I'm cold," Will muttered, pointedly not making eye contact and shuffling off the porch.

Will had gone out of his way to avoid taking rides to school from his mom, but she'd still never let him go alone. Mike always walked him to school. If it were anyone else, he might've thrown a fit over being treated like a baby (he was fourteen for God's sake). But this was Mike, so he let it slide. Besides, it's not like he didn't like being in Mike's company. He quite enjoyed it actually. Maybe a bit too much.

"So listen," Mike said as they began to trace their way to the end of the block. "You know how we got that spelling and vocab test in third period?"

"Yeah."

"I was thinking maybe we should go over some of it."

"What, like right now?"

Mike glanced at his calculator watch. "We got time," he said, unfolding a dog-eared sheet of looseleaf from his left pocket.

"Don't you already know every word in the English language?" Will asked.

"Maybe one day," Mike replied. "Anyway, so how about I read off a definition and then you tell me what the word is and how to spell it?"

"Aren't you supposed to give me the word? That's how a spelling bee works, right?"

"That defeats the point of the vocabulary component, Byers. You

should have them memorized anyway."

"Who said I didn't?"

"You wanna do this or not?"

"Pfft. Fine."

"Okay, here's one.. 'the state of feeling gratitude.'"

"Uh... *Appreciative*," Will said, conjuring up the mental image of his school notes. "That's A-P-P-R-E... Hang on, is *appreciative* with an S-H or a C-H?"

"I can't tell you!" Mike exclaimed. "But, for the record, it's neither."

"What?" Will said. "Gimme that!"

He leapt at Mike to snatch the paper from his hands. That's when his fingers brushed against Mike's palm. Will almost jumped out of his skin. A jolt of *something* surged through him. It was sharp, tingling, and branched out to the tips of his limbs. He withdrew in shock.

He wanted more.

Mike stared at him for a second before giggling. He mustn't have felt it. Will laughed sheepishly, hoping he could brush the awkwardness off unnoticed. It seemed he succeeded. Mike didn't say anything about it.

They continued with their quiz for the remainder of the walk, Mike instinctively steering them the long way and far from the forested path. Will had a hard time even jokingly referring to it as *Mirkwood* anymore. He didn't like thinking about it. He hadn't been down that way in ages.

And yes, he was sweating again by the time they reached Hawkins Middle School. He made no mention of his discomfort to Mike, who held the door open for him. Will couldn't shake the icy sensation within, no matter how many layers of cloth and sweat were wrapped around him.

It was worse inside the school. Rumour said they kept the temperature so low to make sure the students stayed awake.

The English test came and went, Will totally convinced he bungled the spelling component. Since the events earlier that school year, he'd been suffering through bizarre comprehension problems. Reading became painful with words leaping around the page, flipping and turning and merging into each other. Every number four transfigured into a nine, division signs becoming pluses and minuses. His memory stuttered, leaving him to puzzle over the simplest tasks. Most of it was minor, but he couldn't shake the feeling that *He* took something before taking off into the night sky. It was like that ghoulish Shadow Monster had so thoroughly rattled Will's brain that the creature's mere absence forged a sucking hole that couldn't be filled. Everything disappeared into it—information, warmth, and his sense of caring.

He felt nothing but that vague insatiable hunger.

In fact, Will had become so apathetic, he could hardly get excited for the Party's D&D nights anymore. It felt like going through the motions. They'd gather in Mike's basement, Dustin would yell a few times, Lucas would argue. Sometimes Max would show up. At the end of the night, they either crashed there or scattered to their respective homes. And he hated that he couldn't feel anything for it.

He'd gotten good at faking smiles. He practiced in the bathroom mirror.

But that one moment with Mike, when their hands touched, he *felt* something. He didn't know what it was, but the shock of suddenly feeling so *alive*, even for such a brief moment, rocked him to the core. He'd been reeling over it all day, guiltily scheming on ways he could reproduce it. Maybe he'd ask Mike for a pencil and reach a little too far to get it. Maybe he could bump shoulders with him in the hallway. Maybe he could just *ask*.

But Will Byers wasn't a gambler. The risks were too frightening. What if Mike looked at him funny? Stopped touching him altogether? That'd mean no more hugs or handshakes or high-fives. He'd do that thing that Mike always did, where he'd slowly retreat and pretend nothing's wrong. Then, like smoke in the wicked wind, he'd

disappear.

Oh, there was the chill again. It surged, making Will clutch the sides of his sweater. His muscles quaked, desperate to generate the energy to warm him. He was shivering so bad, he couldn't pay attention to what Lucas and Mike were talking about. Immediately, he scooted back in his chair. The legs squealed against the cafeteria floor, penetrating the animated student chatter with an ear-piercing shriek. He made a dash for the door.

By the time he reached the bathroom, his whole body was shaking. His jittery hands fumbled with the faucet, desperate for hot water. And damn the school plumbing, because the hot taps never worked when you needed them to. The sink sputtered lukewarm until finally deciding on something just about average body temperature. Will rolled up his sleeves and soaked his hands in it. He wished he could teleport home and lie in a steaming bath for the rest of his life. But this would have to do for now.

"Hey."

The unexpected voice almost made him splash his shirt. He flicked his head to the door, seeing Mike's concerned expression.

Will yanked paper towel from the dispenser and furiously dried his hands, the friction being a surprisingly good substitute for the warm water.

Mike paid no attention to his friend's frantic antics. "I was gonna ask you, but the others were around and I thought it might be kinda rude," he said. "But you wanna hang out after school?"

Will blinked. "Um... yes?"

"Oh, okay. Cool. Your place?"

Will nodded. "Sure," he said. Without thinking, he added, "Do you want to spend the night?"

Mike smiled that comforting smile—the one that could untangle a thousand knots in Will's stomach. "Yeah. I mean, if you're okay with that. I guess I could just borrow some pajamas?"

"Sounds good."

"C'mon. Lunch is almost over," Mike patted Will on the shoulder and that rush of warmth came barrelling back. It radiated down Will's arm, into his chest and settled somewhere just below his heart. He stood, soaking it in for only a moment, before following Mike back out into the hall.

"Oh cool, you have *Pac-Man*?"

Little plastic cartridges clicked together as Mike perused Will's meagre Atari game selection. He was sprawled out on the Byers' living room carpet, stomach to the floor and legs kicking in the air. Will could even make out a little sliver of his friend's bare back where his shirt had come untucked. He quietly chastised himself for looking.

"Yeah," Will said. "It's not really as good as the one at the arcade."

He sat a distance away, back against the sofa. He'd drawn a musty yellow blanket around his shoulders, cloaking himself like a hermit. Mike glanced back at him intermittently with suggestions.

"Uh, what about this one?" Mike flashed the *Berserk* cartridge.

Will shifted. "I don't really want to play Atari games," he said. "But you can, if you want."

Mike turned over, Will thinking he looked a little like a rolling pin as he spun across the carpet toward him. He came to a stop at Will's feet, arms thudding against the carpet with boredom.

"Well, what do you want to do?" Mike asked, looking up at him.

Will sighed. "I don't really care."

"Sure you do. But like, if you really don't care, we could always get a head-start on that math homework due on Monday."

Mike pointed at him knowingly. Rolling his eyes, Will gently smacked Mike's hand away.

"Yeesh, Byers," Mike laughed. "You're freezing."

"What was your first hint?" Will tightened the blanket across his chest.

"Tell you what," Mike said, standing up and stumbling over to the kitchen. He didn't actually *say* what, he just went and did it. Will overheard a substantial amount of clattering followed by the opening and closing of cupboards.

"What are you looking for?" Will called out.

"Hold on, I'll find it!"

Evidently, he did. The kitchen went quiet aside from the sounds of Mike shuffling across the tiles and running the faucet. He poked his head out a few times to catch glimpses of *Body Language*. Will didn't really care for game shows, though he did chuckle at a befuddled lady having a hard time guessing the word *buns*.

Mike didn't come out of the kitchen until the next commercial break. Will heard him cross onto the carpet, and glanced over when he didn't sit down. He carried a mug in his right hand.

"I made you some hot chocolate," he said. "How about we go to your room. It's probably warmer in there."

"Oh... uh, okay," Will said, pleasantly surprised. He didn't think Mike was actually making him anything. In fact, he was expecting Mike to come out with a hand deep inside a bag of potato chips. So, he shed the knitted blanket and followed his friend down the hall, eagerly anticipating the promise of a hot beverage and the comfort of his own bed.

"Any idea what time your mom's gonna be home?" Mike set the mug on the nightstand as Will climbed under the covers.

"Probably not until six."

"Okay," he checked his watch. "That gives us like two hours."

"For what?"

"Dunno. A board game or something."

Mike pushed the wooden closet doors open and examined the top shelf. He reached up and extracted a box.

"Scrabble?" he said.

"Sure."

Mike set the box on the desk and flipped the chair around. He began to set the game up on the end of the bed, nudging Will to cross his legs and make more room for the board.

"Thank you, by the way," Will said, clutching the mug in his hands, blowing on it and hoping it wouldn't agitate the burned patch on his tongue he'd received from chugging too much hot coffee.

Mike shrugged. "How about you start?"

"Aren't we supposed to draw to see who goes first?"

"I'm letting you go first."

"But that's not what the rules say."

"House rules," Mike crossed his arms.

"House rules?" Will repeated.

"Your house. You go first."

"If you insist," Will inspected his tiles and chewed his lip. After a moment's contemplation, he made his move.

Mike cocked his head, examining Will's choice. "Dick? That's what you're starting with? *Dick*?"

"It's *dock*!" Will cried, breaking into a grin. "The blank is an O!"

"Does it matter? I and O are worth the same."

"It's a blank! It's not worth anything."

"Well then," Mike tallied up the points on a scrap of paper. "That's ten points for you."

"It's twenty," Will protested. "First square is double word score. Look it up."

"Okay, okay. Twenty points for Mr. Byers," Mike set the scorecard aside and added his letters to the board. "K-I-T-E. And that's double word score for me as well."

"Nuh-uh. Double letter score. It's only nine points," Will said. "Are you sure you know how to play Scrabble?"

"Not really," Mike replied, jotting down his total.

"Then why are we playing it?"

"Because I know you like it."

Will frowned. He wiggled deeper into the covers, careful not to upset the board. "You don't have to do all these things for me, Mike."

"I know. It's not because I have to. It's because I want to."

Mike just kept looking at him with that dopey affectionate smile. Will hated it. He hated how perfect Mike was, with his dumb calculator watch and his striped polo shirts and his flippy dark bangs that just dipped past his angular brows. He hated the way Mike's slender hands carefully counted the score and nimbly held the pen as he tallied it. He hated how much he wanted to just leap out of bed and tackle his best friend in a hug.

But he didn't. Instead, he just sat and continued the game.

They played until Joyce got home, shoved some frozen pizzas in the oven, and ran around tidying. Mike volunteered to help, since most of the kitchen mess had been a result of his own cupboard misadventures earlier in the afternoon. Will had a hard time feeling anything other than guilt. Both his mom and Mike did nothing but take care of him constantly. He wasn't stupid. He could see the stress it put on them. The sucking void inside of him must've run out of things to devour and moved onto draining the life out of Will's family

and friends too.

He was a burden.

That's all he's ever been. If he hadn't taken the wrong way home in November '83... If he hadn't tried to stand up to the Shadow Monster... If he hadn't let the creeping forces of the netherworld use him as their eyes and ears... Then maybe, just maybe, he'd be worth it. All the suffering in Hawkins these past few years. That was *him*. And his loved ones were damned to clean up his messes, batten down the hatches, and hope that when the next wave of horrors came around, it wouldn't come for *them*.

Will Byers was so, so cold.

They settled back in Will's room after the sun plunged below the horizon. The remains of their previous Scrabble session still lay upon the bedspread.

"You want to play another game?" Mike asked.

Will shook his head, "I'm tired."

Mike glanced at his watch. "It's only eight."

"Yeah. It's eight. And I'm tired."

"Okay, we'll clean this up and we can get changed and stuff," Mike began putting his plan into action. "At least that way if we wanna stay up, we can."

"Stay up?"

"Yeah. And talk. If you want."

"Are we gonna braid each other's hair too?" Will joked.

"Hmmm. It's getting long enough that it's theoretically possible."

Mike packed up the board game. Standing on his tippy-toes, he slid it back into place on the closet shelf.

"There should be a sleeping bag in there you can use," Will said.

Mike hummed. "Actually," he turned to Will but didn't quite meet his eyes. "You think your bed can fit us both?"

Will choked on his own saliva. "I, uh... I think... Uh, maybe? What? I mean, why?"

"We don't have to!" Mike interjected. "If you don't want to, that's fine. Sorry, it was a stupid idea. I'll just get the sleeping bag."

"No," Will didn't even know why he stopped him. "It's okay. We can... we can share the bed."

"Are you sure?"

And Will felt his limbs eagerly shudder. Mike would be next to him. Mike would be inches away from him for the whole night. Maybe he could sneak a few of those electrifying touches here and there. Maybe they'd just have to press up against each other. Will's bed was only a twin after all.

"Y-yes."

Mike smiled meekly and shuffled over to the dresser. He tapped on the front. "Do you have those *Star Wars* pajamas in here?"

"Yeah. They should be near the front."

After locating them, Mike crept off to the bathroom to change, leaving Will in a strange state of euphoric shock. Sure, he'd slept within arm's reach of Mike plenty of times. They'd even slept next to each other with Dustin and Lucas in Mike's musty basement before. But just the two of them? That made something blossom inside Will and he couldn't tell if it was anxious anticipation or some kind of dread.

In the meantime, Will also got changed and immediately leapt back into bed. Being outside of the covers for too long meant whatever warmth he'd begun to accumulate would dissipate.

Not long after, Mike came back in. He snapped off the bedroom light,

leaving the glow of Will's nightlight as the sole source of illumination.

"You wanna move over?" he asked, coming to the edge of the bed.

"Oh. Yeah."

Will slid to the other side, paving enough room for his taller friend to lie down. He shivered when Mike climbed in beside him, their bare feet brushing against each other. Mike yelped.

"You're like a block of ice!" he said in a harsh whisper.

"Sorry," Will turned, back facing Mike and swaddling himself in the sheets.

They sat in silence for a moment until Will heard the telltale sound of Mike's clunky watch thudding onto the nightstand surface. The bed creaked beneath them and suddenly Will found Mike's fingers worming their way under his arm. He sucked in a breath.

"I-is this okay?" Mike stammered, hand tentatively ghosting over Will's chest. His fingertips grazed Will's t-shirt, resting without putting any weight down. Will shuddered, realizing just how happy he felt, how calm he was—how much warmer he became in Mike's embrace.

"Yes," Will breathed, arching back to inch closer to Mike's chest.

Mike's palm settled against Will, fingers rutting against the grooves in the smaller boy's ribcage, thumb grasping against the fabric of his shirt, anchoring the two of them together.

"Are you sure?" Mike whispered. "Because it's okay if it isn't. I can sleep on the floor, you know. I don't want to, um... make you uncomfortable or anything, since I..."

"Shhh..." Will cut his babbling short. He brought his hand to Mike's, cupping the back of it and lacing their fingers together. "Thank you," he added.

"For what?"

"For being here. For always being here."

Mike swallowed. "I... you know, uh... you know how important you are to me, right?" He leaned his cheek against Will's shoulder. "Do you remember what I told you? That night in the shed?"

Will nodded, heat welling in his cheeks and behind his eyes.

"I meant it," Mike murmured, his free hand restlessly fiddling with the pilling fabric of the bedsheets. He could feel Will's pulse through their joined fingers, shooting rushing waves of comfort. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I'll always be here for you. I owe you that much."

"I just don't understand," Will whispered. "Why me? You have everything, Mike. Like, your family is doing well. You've got money. And El... she's beautiful. She's smart. She's strong. I'm not any of those things."

Mike frowned. With considerably more effort than he initially anticipated, he curled his arm in, forcing Will to flip over and face him.

"Will, listen to me," he said sternly. "You matter. The Party isn't complete without you. I'm not complete without you. Being friends with you? That's part of who I am."

Will looked away.

"I never told you, but..." Mike took a deep breath. "When you first went missing, I got to a really bad place, okay? It's like, I knew you were out there. I knew you were just past arm's reach and I knew that, if not me, then someone could save you. That was El. But... some stuff happened, there was a fight, and she wasn't around anymore. It wasn't even that long, and I know it sounds stupid, but I just got thinking maybe we'd never get you back. And then Troy and James threatened Dustin. They threatened to cut his teeth out. They told me to jump off the cliff, the one out at Sattler's Quarry."

"Mike," Will met his eyes. "You didn't..."

"Yeah, Will. I did. I jumped," Mike sighed. "God, it's so dumb thinking

of it now. But you don't know how hopeless I was—about you, about El, about everything. I just stepped forward and hoped I didn't have to think about what happened next. I hoped I didn't have to think anymore, honestly."

"How bad did you get hurt?"

"I didn't. El was there. She saved me. If it weren't for her, I'd be..."

"Dead."

"Yeah."

Will curled into Mike's chest, pressing his face into his shirt. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"No, no, no. It's not your fault," Mike said, threading his hand through Will's hair. "I just want you to know how important you are. Even if you don't understand why."

"But it is my fault," Will's voice broke. "People c-can't be around me without getting hurt. You almost killed yourself. Bob died. He *died*, Mike. All because of me."

"Stop," Mike demanded. "One thing you really need to learn is to stop blaming yourself for the shitty things that happen to you. You couldn't have known what was going to happen. None of us could have. Do you remember what Hopper called that?"

"Survivor's guilt," Will muttered.

"Exactly," Mike said. "We can sit here all night and talk about the things we should've seen coming. But we won't. Because we didn't. And we can't go back in time and change it." He sighed, "Look, bad things happened to you. They happened to all of us. And I can't promise that they won't happen again."

Will sniffled, eyes hot with the tears spilling onto Mike's t-shirt. He wanted to disappear. He wanted Mike to just crush him into utter nonexistence. At least then, he'd die the closest thing to happy he could imagine.

"But I can promise one thing, hey?" Mike's gentle fingers tilted Will's head to face him. Now, Will could see the matching wet streaks across Mike's cheeks. "I will always be your best friend," Mike said. "I love you. I always will."

"I..." Will croaked. "I love you too."

"Always?"

"Always."